

The Struggle For Equality Enters a New Phase

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Use Words Carefully

In the last few days political personalities have said things — or things were said in their presence — that tantamount to veiled threats with unsavoury innuendoes, that may trigger unexpected consequences.

The first salvo was fired by an over-enthusiastic JCD (Jatiyatabadi Chhatradal) leader who sought to establish a Bangladesh free of Hasina. At the same JCD convention, the participants asked the Prime Minister for a permission to deal with the organisers of hartals in the streets. Hasina, the leader of the Awami League, has on her part, posed the question whether people would have to force their way into the PM's residence to realise their demands.

There have been other unsavoury statements, phrases, and provocative remarks marking a dangerous drift in the use of political idiom. Surely these are not to be taken in their literal meanings. But as the threats are becoming more personal, open and provocative, we express our deep concern over this sudden slide in the respect for political norms and culture.

We already have enough of contentious issues on the table. Why use a vocabulary that has the potential to push the nation on to the brink of an ugly confrontation? These irresponsible statements may unleash forces that neither side will be in a position to rein in.

We fervently urge all political leaders, especially Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina not to permit politics of rhetoric to deteriorate into threats, unsavoury language and vulgar personal attacks. After all, there is a world above and beyond politics. Let us not be uncivil.

Censorship in Sri Lanka

A tough media censorship is now in force in Sri Lanka. Publication and broadcast of war-related stories need prior clearance of the government.

Quite predictably, the Sri Lankan government has invoked national interest and security considerations to impose this measure upon the country's journalist community. Originally, the censorship had been meant for the foreign press as well, but half-way through its operation — since September 21 — the restrictions were withdrawn from them. The courtesy shown to the foreign media may have been in recognition of the human rights concern abroad over the happenings in Sri Lanka but the domestic press must have felt let down by it.

It is not out of a mere sense of fraternity that we are being sympathetic towards the Sri Lankan journalists rather it is an article of faith with us that putting fetters on free reporting and expression of views always turns out to be counter-productive. For instance, the reports in the US press on the Vietnam war highlighting the cruelties perpetrated in the battle-fields had a sobering influence on the American policy-makers to wind up the war in Vietnam sooner than later.

History teaches us that national interest or state security has hardly ever been endangered through the foibles of journalists rather lapses of insiders put it to jeopardy.

We are against press censorship of any form and under any circumstances because the government emerges here in the monopolist role of questioning the sense of responsibility and patriotism of the journalist community. This is striking at the very root of the media's *raison d'etre*. Press being the Fourth Estate its members are hardly entitled to such an unpleasant surprise when ordinary laws can deal with any kind of irresponsible behaviour.

Muggers' Den

A front-page investigative report in a widely read Bangla daily yesterday shed some new light on mugging in the metropolis. It has not only underscored a higher rate of the crime but also revealed the *modus operandi* of the same, based on an interview with some underworld operators.

There have been at least 193 reported cases of snatching each month during the last quarter of the current year, a hundred per cent increase over the level of the preceding three months. This is just a tip of the iceberg when viewed in the well-known context of very many such incidents going totally unrecorded with the police.

The muggers operate in groups spread over earmarked areas counting on a thin police presence, there being only 14,000 cops to a city population of 70 lakhs. The actual deployment for street patrol is abysmally low given their VIP and traffic control duties.

Some of them, said to be on the 'suspicion' list of the police are occasionally caught and released. Thus branded, they see no alternative but to sink back into the muggers' fold. Many of them being drug-addicts have use for quick money which mugging offers aplenty. Some social reform-cum-rehabilitation process needs to be set in motion among them. Here we can begin with the 270 who were hospitalised during the past six months following public beating after being caught red-handed.

While they undergo a self-correctional procedure they can supply us with valuable information about their fellow muggers. From this standpoint, let the public be urged through the media to hand over an apprehended snatcher to the police forthwith without beating him blue to a point of maiming him, far less to death.

CYNICISM is often mistaken for wisdom. The Beijing Conference, according to the cynics, is just a matter of liberal rhetoric which will be soon forgotten. Societies, they say, do not change simply because a conference was held somewhere and a declaration was issued and a programme of action was adopted. There is, unfortunately, much truth in such a cynical view. Some conferences have indeed ended without leaving any trace. But it is not the whole truth. I have no doubt in my mind that despite the innate conservatism of societies which tend to resist all reforms as attacks on cherished traditions and beliefs, there is a wind of change blowing across the world. The women of the world are certainly moving, may be at a snail's pace, but still moving ahead in their centuries-old struggle for equality. In the broad canvas of history the Beijing Conference will be recognized as a step forward in their long march.

The size of a conference cannot be taken as a measure of its importance but one cannot ignore the fact that the recently held women's conference in Beijing was probably the biggest international conference ever held.

Convened by the United Nations, it was attended by 17000 participants, including around 6000 official delegates, over 4000 NGO observers and nearly 4000 journalists. The parallel NGO forum held outside Beijing attracted some 26000 participants from over 4000 women's organizations accredited with the United Nations. The Declaration and the Platform of Action adopted at the conference unanimously is a testimony to

the strength and tenacity of the women's lobby in different parts of the world. It is also an evidence of the growing realization in the man's world that the other half of humanity is not going to accept any longer an inferior status as has been their lot ever since the beginning of human societies.

Predictably, the women's groups from the different parts of the world were deeply influenced by what they saw as "their" problem. The women in the developed world have already made significant progress in many fields and these days their concerns are largely focussed on issues such as equal pay for equal work, sexual and reproductive rights. The developing countries concentrated more on the basic problems arising from poverty, ill health and social and economic discrimination. Alongside these basic difference in approach, the religious lobbies became the standard-bearers of conservatism and status quo. The Vatican and the Islamic fundamentalist countries joined forces to become allies and act as a "Chinese Wall" in Beijing. The memories of the Crusades were forgotten in their enthusiasm to fight the rebellious women! No one was really surprised when Saudi Arabia refused to attend the conference because some of the conservative Islamic countries which attended it did so not to promote its objectives but to block the adoption of decisions which might lead to a change in the status of women. Mercifully they did not cast negative votes but as

many as 30 of these countries, mostly Islamic countries, have reportedly entered reservations on sections of the documents adopted unanimously. I am particularly happy that Bangladesh endorsed both the Declaration and Platform for Action without reservation. Any reservation would have been a violation of our constitution which, in article 28 (2) under the chapter on Fundamental Rights says, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of

issues are global and universal. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway bitterly criticized those who tried to take shelter under religious or cultural traditions and practices to block progress and reform. Citing the case of genital mutilation, she said, "It does not become sacrosanct or elevated beyond the realm of politics, just because that practice can be said to be part of a cultural pattern." Mrs Clinton's statement at the conference attracted much attention both because she

rights as separate from human rights." She added "No one should be forced to remain silent for fear of religious or political persecution, arrest, abuse or torture."

Violence against women is not confined to any special part of the world, it is really world-wide. The sub-continent has, of course, its own special forms of abuse and violence against women. In India the curse of dowry is almost a universal social phenomenon which casts a shadow on the life of every female child almost from the moment of her birth. Not a day passes when one does not read in the newspapers gruesome tales of torture, burning and violence on wives for having failed to bring enough dowry money from her parents. This curse, regrettably, has spread in Bangladesh like cancer though it is not in keeping with the basic concept of marriage and the law of inheritance in Muslim society. Apart from these entrenched social ills, attacks on the women of Bangladesh seem to be on the rise in the recent years. We must reflect on this phenomenon. Is it only the growing clout of the Islamic fundamentalists which is responsible for the increasing frequency of attacks on the women? If so, what have we, the liberal and progressive mainstream of the society done, to fight these elements and other assorted extremists?

One must recognize that religion, instead of uplifting the spiritual life of the people, is being used to suppress the women's natural rights

and aspirations. Social discrimination is more invidious and much harder to deal with than a legal disability. For instance, when a woman conceives a child out of wedlock, it is she who is punished by the society but the man responsible goes scot-free. In fact, he can then go for new conquests with impunity! One reads these heart-rending stories almost every day. For every story in the press, there must be a hundred more which are suppressed for fear of the shame. The women have carried these burdens of shame for too long. Time has come to demolish these entrenched social attitudes which victimized only the women.

One must begin to think about the implementation of the Platform for Action. A special committee of the parliament to monitor the effective implementation would have been perhaps the best way to proceed but since our parliament has been rendered non-functional we must devise other ways to begin work in earnest. Perhaps a national committee to provide guide-lines and monitor progress is the answer but can we expect such initiative from the present regime? The memory of Yasmin and many others like her makes one wonder about its commitment to this cause. But the NGOs must not wait for these official initiatives. They should form a national coalition immediately to monitor the progress in the implementation of the Platform for Action. They must ensure that the historic documents which came out of Beijing will not be allowed merely to gather dust. The great task at hand must be done a task in which our constitution should be a great inspiration.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



public life." Such a clear statement in the constitution puts us ahead of many other states in the legal battle for equality of women. Article 10 in the chapter on Fundamental Principles of State Policy also reinforces the states' commitment to promote equality of women with men. The article says, "Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life". In believe it is useful to recall from time to time the very liberal and progressive provisions of our constitution.

One can take some quiet satisfaction from the fact that despite differences in outlook and priorities in the developed and developing parts of the world, the conference affirmed that the women's is-

happens to be the wife of the American President but also because of the under-current of tension that the Chinese government was barely able to conceal. Mrs Clinton echoed the sentiments of women every where and perhaps many men as well when she said, "As long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled, and subjected to violence in and out of their homes, the potential of the human family to create a peaceful and prosperous world will not be realized." In a most perceptive remark she said, "It is time to break our silence, it is time for us to say here in Beijing and the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women's

Downsizing of Government

DOWNSIZING of government is hardly a popular topic with government servants. Particularly in a situation where government is still the largest employer, any suggestion of downsizing is bound to evoke strong reactions. And yet, there is no way that this process can be avoided now. An organized discussion on the downsizing of government in Bangladesh should obviously start with its rationale. The main argument in favour of downsizing government in Bangladesh is that will reduce the government expenditure now being made on a highly unproductive bureaucracy, help deregulated and privatise the economy, cut through red tape and boost market-led growth, and in the process, more than make up for the temporary unemployment caused. Secondly, a downsized government will be able to concentrate more on its core activities, such as law and order; domestic resource mobilisation; stimulation of the economy through commercial, fiscal and monetary instruments; provision of basic physical infrastructure; and welfare through primary health care, family planning and primary, women's vocational and technical education. Thirdly, in the concrete conditions of Bangladesh, downsizing can also be used for getting rid of corrupt and inefficient officials. This step will not only clean up the government machinery of the undesirable lot but also provide better emoluments and career advancement prospects to those being re-

Downsizing of Government

The correct procedure would be to first get rid of undesirable officials across the board, through either retrenchment or retirement, and then go for the exercise of abolishing, amalgamating, downsizing and even expanding government organizations on the basis of felt requirements

tained, and as a consequence bring about an end to the present acute inter-service bickering.

Several methods are available for downsizing the government. These are removal of approved posts which have not been filled for quite some time; retrenchment of temporary and casual functionaries; strict enforcement of retirement age with either no extensions or highly selective ones; lower retirement age for inducing the undesirable officials to opt for voluntary retirement; freeze or near-freeze on recruitment at entry level; golden handshakes consisting of voluntary retirement with financial incentives; and finally, selected retrenchment of staff on the basis of efficiency and financial integrity. These may be applied singly or in combination.

Of these methods, the golden handshake should be applied least because it entails huge financial commitment and because there is a tendency among the better officials to take advantage of it. Selective retrenchment can be highly effective but it requires elaborate preparation, commitment, and most of all, the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Indeed, if this methodology

in practice turns out to be an instrument of nepotism, corruption and victimisation, then it will bring about administrative disaster. Remember that even when such a retrenchment policy is implemented most conscientiously, some genuine mistakes will have been made. In any case, there will be resentment of the extreme order from adversely affected

officials, however undesirable they may be. They will indeed always project themselves as innocent lambs and move heaven and earth to seek "redress", and they have to be firmly tackled. Drawing up the list of retrenched officials should be done by a small group of knowledgeable, trusted and conscientious officers under the strict guidance of the top political leadership, and it has to be finalised accurately and swiftly to avoid speculation and leakage to the press. Retrenchment of this kind will also require changes in the existing law so that not only can it be done legally but also may not be later on ques-

tioned in a superior court. A less painful alternative to outright retrenchment would be to lower (through legislation) both voluntary and compulsory retirement age (with full benefits) from the present 25 to 20 years of service; then indirectly persuade the undesirables to take advantage of the lower voluntary retirement age; and finally compulsorily retire

undesirable officials across the board, through either retrenchment or retirement, and then go for the exercise of abolishing, amalgamating, downsizing and even expanding government organizations on the basis of felt requirements. In this way, through careful redeployment, retained officials may be moved about to fit in with the new organizational structures.

In order to make the downsizing exercise successful, a number of supporting measures will have to be taken simultaneously. Firstly, job creation in the private sector has to be stimulated in all possible ways, and success in this regard has to be well publicised to allay the fears of the common man. Secondly, provided normal banking conditions are satisfied, retrenched/retired officials should be provided with greater access to bank loans in order to set up small businesses and other income generating projects. Thirdly, if necessary, the support of groups who will benefit from the downsizing exercise should be articulated to counter opposition. Fourthly, the timing of the downsizing operation has to be carefully chosen. In our democratic set-up, for obvious reasons, downsizing has to be carried

out at one go in perhaps no more than three months during the first two years of the five-year term of the government. Various measures chosen will also have to be carefully sequenced, with the most hurtful ones to be taken up first and completed swiftly. A minimum of six months of careful preparation (including legislative changes) will be required before the measures are taken up for implementation. At no time should the exercise be even remotely seen by members of the public as an outside imposition (i.e. from World Bank, IMF Asian Development Bank, etc). Therefore, the precise timing and pace and the exact content of downsizing at every stage have to be worked out by Bangladeshis themselves in the light of existing conditions.

We have little choice before us other than downsize our government. As indicated earlier, in Bangladesh downsizing is justified not only on economic grounds but also on management considerations. To put it bluntly, the Bangladesh government must shrink in size because it does not have the required quality manpower to run many of its departments and corporations efficiently and incorruptly, and there is no way that quantity can be converted into quality even within a considerable time-frame, given that spoils system recruitment, poor grooming and shoddy training over the years have already done irreparable damage to our civil bureaucracy.

Making Government Work

by Analyst

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those among them who refuse to retire voluntarily. In this way, while the government achieves its objective of getting rid of undesirable officials, there is no loss of retirement benefits and also the loss of face and social stigma attached to compulsory retirement is minimized.

In the past, retrenchment, the golden handshake, or downsizing were made synonymous with the wholesale abolition of particular departments/organisations. This is an unscientific approach, because it leads to loss of desirable officials. The correct procedure would be to first get rid of

officials, however undesirable they may be. They will indeed always project themselves as innocent lambs and move heaven and earth to seek "redress", and they have to be firmly tackled. Drawing up the list of retrenched officials should be done by a small group of knowledgeable, trusted and conscientious officers under the strict guidance of the top political leadership, and it has to be finalised accurately and swiftly to avoid speculation and leakage to the press. Retrenchment of this kind will also require changes in the existing law so that not only can it be done legally but also may not be later on ques-

To the Editor...

"A scared citizen"

Sir, I sympathise with "a scared citizen" whose letter you published on 26 September. But, I would like to scare him further.

Was "a scared citizen" not at all scared when the BNP commissioner candidate of old Dhaka and his 'goons' (the word is taken from his valuable letter) riddled the bodies of about a dozen innocent people in broad daylight after losing the election?

Was "a scared citizen" not at all scared to learn that all the 11 persons arrested in a rape case recently are from the BNP student wing?

Was "a scared citizen" not scared after the BNP Government in the current parliament turned down an anti-gambling and anti-alcohol bill tabled by the Awami League, despite the fact that the BNP campaigned in the 1990 elections, as a party standing for values?

Was "a scared citizen" not scared after the BNP candidate for the Sylhet Poursahava elections supported a hartal call last year, after losing to an Awami League candidate?

all scared that no elections of DUCSU is being held for over five years now and that the BNP VP is about to complete a five-year term as an MP?

Was "a scared citizen" not at all scared after BNP goons' (in his words) tried to strip a lady Awami League Commissioner in the city?

We have many reasons to be scared.

Khorshed Alam
282, North Shahjahanpur
Dhaka

Duty on cars

Sir, Among other things, a major cause for congestion on the city roads is excessive number of cars. Hardly one or two people are riding a car but the load caused on the roads is rather too much. Moreover it is polluting the air. There has been tremendous growth in the number of cars in recent years on the roads of the Metropolis because may be, re-conditioned cars are comparatively, quite cheap these days.

In Singapore to prevent congestion and pollution cars are heavily taxed. Their objective is not raising revenue because per capita there is

quite high. In Bangladesh we need such a policy much more than Singapore. Apart from preventing congestion and pollution we shall earn revenue for the exchequer which is badly needed for accelerating development. However for convenience of the general public duties on buses and minibuses should be reduced or may even be withdrawn so that we can have more buses and less cars on the roads.

Given the limited resources, problem of pollution, congestion and foreign exchange, our honeymoon with cars should have been over long ago. It is high time that we should discourage cars and encourage buses in the greater interest of the society. Will the National Board of Revenue ponder over this?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

Admission tests

Sir, Though belated the government deserves appreciation for making a correct decision by doing away with the admission tests at college level. This will not only min-

imise a lot of work-load of the colleges but also save time, money and worries of both the students and the guardians to a great extent. If the decision is not nullified under any pressure or plea, it will have a far-reaching effect on the students who will have no other alternative but to devote themselves in their studies in order to make good results in the examinations.

Besides, under the new system, chances of foul playing in getting admissions will be reduced to a minimum and so, this will go a long way to help develop a healthy environment in the schools and the colleges. On the other hand, the century-old system of evaluating merit by examinations at different levels as prevalent in the country, is thereby upheld and not at all under-rated as was done in admission tests before.

I am at a loss to understand why the government is so late in arriving at such a wise decision. However, it is always better late than never. I hope that a good sense will prevail upon the university authorities of the country so that they also follow the

wise and widely acclaimed decision of the government in respect of admissions at college level and bring about a radical change in their systems by doing away with the admission tests in no time.

A T Mazharul Haque
Sylhet

Scar on Society

Sir, Some political parties gave hartal call for seventy-two hours from the morning of September 16th. On the very first day few gentlemen were stripped of their dresses by some unruly university students. Photographs of the incident were also published in some newspapers. It is not understood why the supporters of hartal subjected these innocent persons to such harassment and humiliation for no fault of their own.

One wonders what education our universities are imparting to their students and what for the poor tax payers are subsidizing university education and what for guardians are sending their children to universities. Universities are supposed to be the centres of excellence

and enlightenment. This sort of behaviour is reducing middle age barbarism and vandalism to pigmy proportions. These incidents are, no doubt, behind-the-scene machinations of the political parties to ensure 'success' of the hartals. After each hartal we find the relevant political parties congratulating the people for their 'spontaneous' response for making hartals 'a tremendous success' while the innocent people are suffering silently and helplessly.

Hartals are causing acute hardship and misery, pain and penury to the common man for whose 'democratic rights' the political parties are shedding crocodile tears. This is simply a power game. The simple fact is that if this sort of activities continue we are doomed to destruction and democracy will be the easy victim of this sort of adventurism. Will the politicians and political parties do some soul searching and mend their ways? Otherwise future generations will not forgive them for landing the nation into such a mess.

Mrs Montaz Jahan
Fulbari, Sylhet